

Party and Working Class

Anton Pannekoek

<http://kurasje.tripod.com/index.html>

We are only at the very earliest stages of a new workers' movement. The old movement was embodied in parties, and today belief in the party constitutes the most powerful check on the working class' capacity for action. That is why we are not trying to create a new party. This is so, not because our numbers are small -- a party of any kind begins with a few people -- but because, in our day, a party cannot be other than an organization aimed at directing and dominating the proletariat. To this type of organization we oppose the principle that the working class can effectively come into its own and prevail only by taking its destiny into its own hands. The workers are not to adopt the slogans of any group whatsoever, not even our own groups; they are to think, decide and act for themselves. Therefore, in this transitional period, the natural organs of education and enlightenment are, in our view, work groups, study and discussion circles, which have formed of their own accord and are seeking their own way.

This view directly contradicts the traditional ideas about the role of the party as an essential educational organ of the proletariat. Hence it is resisted in many quarters where, however, there is no further desire to have dealings either with the Socialist Party or the Communist Party. This, no doubt, is to be partly explained by the strength of tradition: when one has always regarded the class war as a party war and a war between parties, it is very difficult to adopt the exclusive viewpoint of class and of the class war. But partly, too, one is faced with the clear idea that, after all, it is incumbent on the party to play a role of the first importance in the proletarian struggle for freedom. It is this idea we shall now examine more closely.

The whole question pivots, in short, on the following distinction: a party is a group based on certain ideas held in common, whereas a class is a group united on the basis of common interests. Membership in a class is determined by function in the production process, a function that creates definite interests. Membership in a party means being one of a group having identical views about the major social questions.

In recent times, it was supposed for theoretical and practical reasons that this fundamental difference would disappear within a class party, the 'workers' party.' During the period when Social Democracy was in full growth, the current impression was that this party would gradually unite all the workers, some as militants, others as sympathizers. And since the theory was that identical interests would necessarily engender identical ideas and aims, the distinction between class and party was bound, it was believed, to disappear. Social Democracy remained a minority group, and moreover became the target of attack by new workers' groups. Splits occurred within it, while its own character underwent radical change and certain articles of its program were either revised or interpreted in a totally different sense. Society does not develop in a continuous way, free from setbacks, but through conflicts and antagonisms. While the working class battle is widening in scope, the enemy's strength is increasing. Uncertainty about the way to be followed constantly and repeatedly troubles the minds of the combatants; and doubt is a factor in division, of internal quarrels and conflicts within the workers' movement.

It is useless to deplore these conflicts as creating a pernicious situation that should not exist and which is making the workers powerless. As has often been pointed out, the working class is not weak because it is divided; on the contrary, it is divided because it is weak. And the reason why the proletariat ought to seek new ways is that the enemy has strength of such a kind that the old methods are ineffectual. The working class will not secure these ways by magic, but through a great effort, deep reflection, through the clash of divergent opinions and the conflict of impassioned ideas. It is incumbent upon it to find its own way, and precisely therein is the *raison d'être* of the internal

differences and conflicts. It is forced to renounce outmoded ideas and old chimeras, and it is indeed the difficulty of this task that engenders such big divisions.

Nor should the illusion be nursed that such impassioned party conflicts and opinion clashes belong only to a transitional period such as the present one, and that they will in due course disappear, leaving a unity stronger than ever. Certainly, in the evolution of the class struggle, it sometimes happens that all the various elements of strength are merged in order to snatch some great victory, and that revolution is the fruit of this unity. But in this case, as after every victory, divergences appear immediately when it comes to deciding on new objectives. The proletariat then finds itself faced with the most arduous tasks: to crush the enemy, and more, to organize production, to create a new order. It is out of the question that all the workers, all categories and all groups, whose interests are still far from being homogeneous, should think and feel in the same way, and should reach spontaneous and immediate agreement about what should be done next. It is precisely because they are committed to finding for themselves their own way ahead that the liveliest differences occur, that there are clashes among them, and that finally, through such conflict, they succeed in clarifying their ideas.

No doubt, if certain people holding the same ideas get together to discuss the prospects for action, to hammer out ideas by discussion, to indulge in propaganda for these attitudes, then it is possible to describe such groups as parties. The name matters little, provided that these parties adopt a role distinct from that which existing parties seek to fulfil. Practical action, that is, concrete class struggle, is a matter for the masses themselves, acting as a whole, within their natural groups, notably the work gangs, which constitute the units of effective combat. It would be wrong to find the militants of one tendency going on strike, while those of another tendency continued to work. In that case, the militants of each tendency should present their viewpoints to the factory floor, so that the workers as a whole are able to reach a decision based on knowledge and facts. Since the war is immense and the enemy's strength enormous, victory must be attained by merging all the forces at the masses' disposal -- not only material and moral force with a view to action, unity and enthusiasm, but also the spiritual force born of mental clarity. The importance of these parties or groups resides in the fact that they help to secure this mental clarity through their mutual conflicts, their discussions, their propaganda. It is by means of these organs of self-clarification that the working class can succeed in tracing for itself the road to freedom.

That is why parties in this sense (and also their ideas) do not need firm and fixed structures. Faced with any change of situation, with new tasks, people become divided in their views, but only to reunite in new agreement; while others come up with other programs. Given their fluctuating quality, they are always ready to adapt themselves to the new.

The present workers' parties are of an absolutely different character. Besides, they have a different objective: to seize power and to exercise it for their sole benefit. Far from attempting to contribute to the emancipation of the working class, they mean to govern for themselves, and they cover this intention under the pretence of freeing the proletariat. Social Democracy, whose ascendant period goes back to the great parliamentary epoch, sees this power as government based on a parliamentary majority. For its part, the Communist Party carries its power politics to its extreme consequences: party dictatorship.

Unlike the parties described above, these parties are bound to have formations with rigid structures, whose cohesion is assured by means of statutes, disciplinary measures, admission and dismissal procedures. Designed to dominate, they fight for power by orienting the militants toward the instruments of power that they possess and by striving constantly to increase their sphere of influence. They do not see their task as that of educating the workers to think for themselves; on the contrary, they aim at drilling them, at turning them into faithful and devoted adherents of their doctrines. While the working class needs unlimited freedom of spiritual development to increase its strength and to conquer, the basis of party power is the repression of all opinions that do not conform

to the party line. In 'democratic' parties, this result is secured by methods that pay lip service to freedom; in the dictatorial parties, by brutal and avowed repression.

A number of workers are already aware that domination by the Socialist Party or the Communist Party would simply be a camouflaged supremacy of the bourgeois class, and would thus perpetuate exploitation and servitude. But, according to these workers, what should take its place is a 'revolutionary party' that would really aim at creating proletarian power and communist society. There is no question here of a party in the sense we defined above, i.e., of a group whose sole objective is to educate and enlighten, but of a party in the current sense, i.e., a party fighting to secure power and to exercise it with a view to the liberation of the working class, and all this as a vanguard, as an organization of the enlightened revolutionary minority.

The very expression 'revolutionary party' is a contradiction in terms, for a party of this kind could not be revolutionary. If it were, it could only be so in the sense in which we describe revolutionary as a change of government resulting from somewhat violent pressures, e.g., the birth of the Third Reich. When we use the word 'revolution,' we clearly mean the proletarian revolution, the conquest of power by the working class.

The basic theoretical idea of the 'revolutionary party' is that the working class could not do without a group of leaders capable of defeating the bourgeoisie for them and of forming a new government, in other words, the conviction that the working class is itself incapable of creating the revolution. According to this theory, the leaders will create the communist society by means of decrees; in other words, the working class is still incapable of administering and organizing for itself its work and production.

Is there not a certain justification for this thesis, at least provisionally? Given that at the present time the working class as a mass is showing itself to be unable to create a revolution, is it not necessary that the revolutionary vanguard, the party, should make the revolution on the working class' behalf? And is not this valid so long as the masses passively submit to capitalism?

This attitude immediately raises two questions. What type of power will such a party establish through the revolution? What will occur to conquer the capitalist class? The answer is self-evident: an uprising of the masses. In effect, only mass attacks and mass strikes lead to the overthrow of the old domination. Therefore, the 'revolutionary party' will get nowhere without the intervention of the masses. Hence, one of two things must occur.

The first is that the masses persist in action. Far from abandoning the fight in order to allow the new party to govern, they organize their power in the factories and workshops and prepare for new battles, this time with a view to the final defeat of capitalism. By means of workers' councils, they form a community that is increasingly close-knit, and therefore capable of taking on the administration of society as a whole. In a word, the masses prove that they are not as incapable of creating the revolution as was supposed. From this moment, conflict inevitably arises between the masses and the new party, the latter seeking to be the only body to exercise power and convinced that the party should lead the working class, that self-activity among the masses is only a factor of disorder and anarchy. At this point, either the class movement has become strong enough to ignore the party or the party, allied with bourgeois elements, crushes the workers. In either case, the party is shown to be an obstacle to the revolution, because the party seeks to be something other than an organ of propaganda and of enlightenment, and because it adopts as its specific mission the leadership and government of the masses.

The second possibility is that the working masses conform to the doctrine of the party and turn over to it control of affairs. They follow directives from above and, persuaded (as in Germany in 1918) that the new government will establish socialism or communism, they get on with their day-to-day work. Immediately, the bourgeoisie mobilizes all its forces: its financial power, its enormous spiritual power, its economic supremacy in the factories and the large enterprises. The reigning party, too weak to withstand such an offensive, can maintain itself in power only by multiplying concessions and withdrawals as proof of its moderation. Then the idea becomes current that for the

moment this is all that can be done, and that it would be foolish for the workers to attempt a violent imposition of utopian demands. In this way, the party, deprived of the mass power of a revolutionary class, is transformed into an instrument for the conservation of bourgeois power.

We have just said that, in relation to the proletarian revolution, a 'revolutionary party' is a contradiction in terms. This could also be expressed by saying that the term 'revolutionary' in the expression 'revolutionary party' necessarily designates a bourgeois revolution. On every occasion, indeed, that the masses have intervened to overthrow a government and have then handed power to a new party, it was a bourgeois revolution that took place -- a substitution of a new dominant category for an old one. So it was in Paris when, in 1830, the commercial bourgeoisie took over from the big landed proprietors; and again, in 1848, when the industrial bourgeoisie succeeded the financial bourgeoisie; and again in 1871 when the whole body of the bourgeoisie came to power. So it was during the Russian Revolution, when the party bureaucracy monopolized power in its capacity as a governmental category. But in our day, both in Western Europe and in America, the bourgeoisie is too deeply and too solidly rooted in the factories and the banks to be removed by a party bureaucracy. Now as always, the only means of conquering the bourgeoisie is to appeal to the masses, the latter taking over the factories and forming their own complex of councils. In this case, however, it seems that the real strength is in the masses who destroy the domination of capital in proportion as their own action widens and deepens.

Therefore, those who contemplate a 'revolutionary party' are learning only a part of the lessons of the past. Not unaware that the workers' parties -- the Socialist Party and Communist Party -- have become organs of domination serving to perpetuate exploitation, they merely conclude from this that it is only necessary to improve the situation. This is to ignore the fact that the failure of the different parties is traceable to a much more general cause -- namely, the basic contradiction between the emancipation of the class, as a body and by their own efforts, and the reduction of the activity of the masses to powerlessness by a new pro-workers' power. Faced with the passivity and indifference of the masses, they come to regard themselves as a revolutionary vanguard. But, if the masses remain inactive, it is because, while instinctively sensing both the colossal power of the enemy and the sheer magnitude of the task to be undertaken, they have not yet discerned the mode of combat, the way of class unity. However, when circumstances have pushed them into action, they must undertake this task by organizing themselves autonomously, by taking into their own hands the means of production, and by initiating the attack against the economic power of capital. And once again, every self-styled vanguard seeking to direct and to dominate the masses by means of a 'revolutionary party' will stand revealed as a reactionary factor by reason of this very conception.